



38 Years Later, JFK Is Mourned Each Day

Arlington Grave Draws Thousands of Visitors, Many Still Overwhelmed by Loss

By ANN O'HANLON
Washington Post Staff Writer

It was half a lifetime ago that John F. Kennedy was assassinated, but every day, thousands walk up the marble steps to his grave. Every day, as far as anyone knows, someone—some random American, often an older woman who remembers that Nov. 22 still too clearly—cries. And about twice a month, someone faints, overwhelmed by the setting, the dead children at Jackie's side, the memories.

For some, the somber grave evokes even more in the wake of Sept. 11.

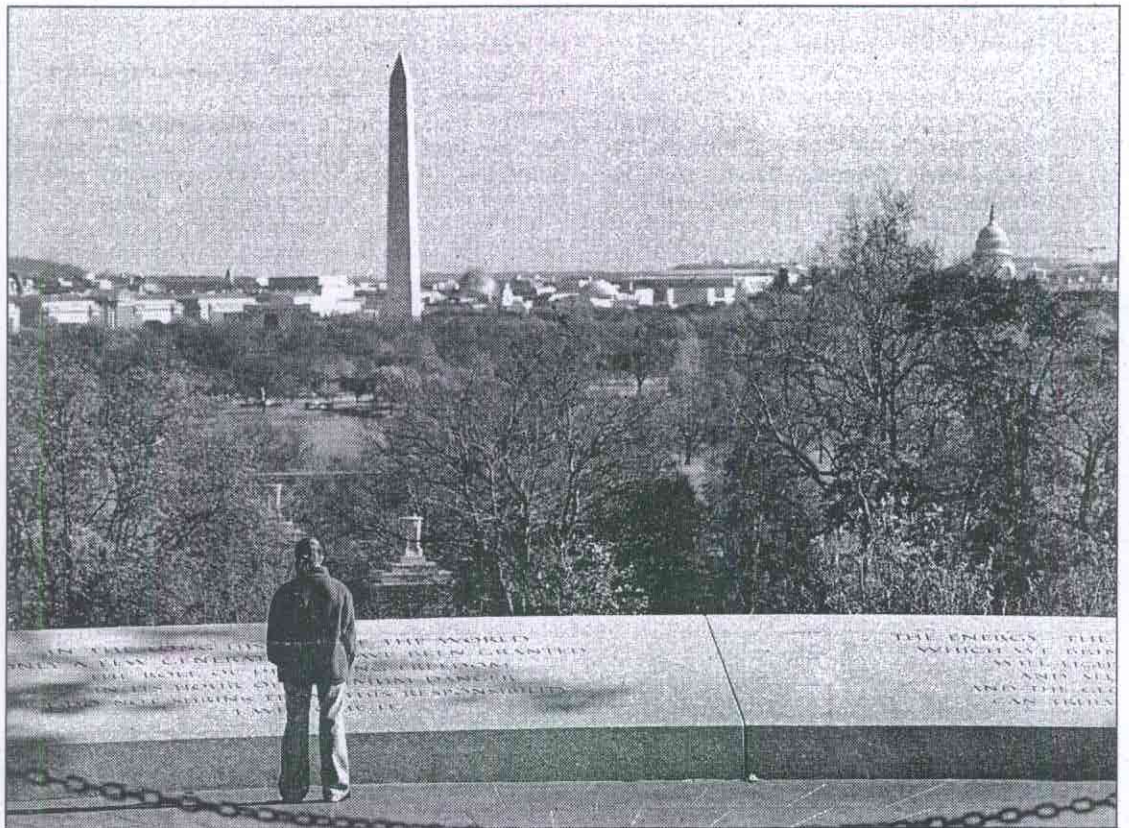
"I just wonder sometimes what he would have thought about something like that happening," said Diana Grandrath, 51, a Californian visiting the grave this week for the third time in her life. "He seemed like such a strong leader. There were a couple of generations in there that didn't know what the fear was, and now it's back."

Like many of the 5,000 daily visitors, Grandrath stood before the eternal flame and wiped away a few tears.

What made her cry, so many decades after the president was shot?

"I guess youth and promise," she said.

Visitors young and old, foreign and domestic, have similar words for the grave, which is being visited in droves again. Shortly after September's terrorist attacks, tourism numbers were sharply down at Arlington National Cemetery, as at other attractions throughout the region. But the numbers have rebounded almost entirely at the cemetery, according to a spokes-



PHOTOS BY DAYNA SMITH—THE WASHINGTON POST

White roses left by family members adorn the gravestone of John F. Kennedy, top left. The nation's 35th president was assassinated 38 years ago today. Above, a visitor looks at the view of Washington from the site at Arlington.

from his sister, Caroline) and that his ashes were scattered in the Atlantic Ocean, where his plane went down in July 1999.

Despite the absence of John Jr., "there's a lot of energy here," said visitor Martha Brower, 49, of Maine.

Visitor after visitor is awed, whether by the power of the grief of this seminal family or of the nation, as felt in passing the cemetery's endless headstones.

Kai Kennedy, 21, a senior at the University of Maryland, said she understood why her elders might be overwhelmed by it.

"Comparable for us is going to be the whole New York World Trade Center thing," she said. "That's what we're going to be fainting over."



Two visitors from Michigan, Ann Conklin and her nephew Philip, pay their respects at the Kennedy grave, which is visited by 5,000 people every day.

woman for the Military District of Washington, which oversees it.

And this week, which marked what would have been Robert F. Kennedy's 76th birthday as well as the 38th anniversary of his elder brother's death, the extended Kennedy clan and thousands of friendly strangers paid their respects.

Two dozen members of the Kennedy family, including Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), the surviving brother, and Ethel Kennedy, Robert's widow, stood Tuesday before the adjacent markers of Robert, John and John's family, praying aloud and then showering them with four dozen long-stemmed white roses.

Afterward, tourists, who had been kept out of the area while the family mourned, poured in, staring at the four JFK family headstones. They brought forth memories of the president's assassination, "one of the defining events of the 20th century," as one British visitor put it.

"I was a housewife. I had children in school," said Mary Frances Smith, 63, another Californian. "It was such a shock."

With that, she, too, began to weep.

"He was loved by so many people. I thought he was a wonderful president. It was a tragic loss for our country," she said.

Some visitors say they are surprised by the emotion the grave draws, but the Arlington County fire department knows better.

Each year, said Assistant Fire Chief Jim Schwartz, county ambulances are called to the cemetery 600 times for stress-related incidents, such as fainting. About 25 of those are for visitors at JFK's

flame.

The county's responsibilities for this and other federal installations within its borders have become a topic of conversation and debate in the expensive aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Pentagon, which also lies within Arlington. Some Arlington officials have stated plainly that they believe the federal government should pay a heftier share of the costs for protecting the sites and responding to such emergency calls.

The visitors are not preoccupied with these questions, though. They want to know other things: Who is the unnamed Kennedy daughter buried there with her parents and 2-day-old Patrick? They have forgotten, or never knew, that the family's first child was stillborn. How does the flame stay lighted, they ask, and the cemetery's Web site gives the answer: "A constantly flashing electric spark near the tip of the nozzle relights the gas should the flame be extinguished by rain, wind or accident."

More than any other question, it seems, the visitors want to know why John F. Kennedy Jr. is not buried there with his parents. The answer, according to spokeswoman Barbara Owens, is that he was not eligible, since he was not a dependent (though the rules no doubt would have waived with a request